# ON REACHING SEVENTY-FIVE

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IN 1942, on our way to the Pacific aboard a little Dutch ship, the *Japara*, it took our naval group six weeks to go from San Francisco to Samoa. Most of us were just a group of refugees from middle age, frightened and apprehensive about our war experience. We thought we were going to be sunk by Japanese submarines any day, as our small group of vessels, three in all, zigzagged to our destination, Noumea, New Caledonia.

In order to keep our spirits high on this long voyage we asked Captain Hammersmaa, the skipper, to give us a course in celestial navigation. Captain Hammersmaa, a born teacher, could really communicate. His rapport with the members of the staff of the expedition was unforgettable, and he helped take our minds off our fears of being torpedoed or bombed.

He began his first lecture by saying, "Gentlemen, you have no idea how vast the heavens are. They are so vast that we have had to create special units of space-time in order to measure the distance between the stars. We call these units 'light-years'." Then he went on to say, "Millions of light-years separate one star from another, one galaxy from another, one constellation from another." At this point he began to laugh uproarioulsy.

"What are you laughing about?" one of us asked.

"Look, gentlemen," he said, still chuckling, "Here I am talking about millions of light years, and if I come home 15 minutes late, my wife gives me hell."

From this anecdote, we can see that time is really relative.

David Schoenbroen, in his book on Charles de Gaulle, has described this powerful historical figure in majestic tones, yet he calls attention to the fact that in spite of his dynamism, his force of character, his vitality, and his authoritarianism, de Gaulle still had one fear, and that fear was, as he called it, "the shipwreck of old age." What he had in

mind was the tragedy of Petain. Petain, you will remember, at 84 took over the presidency of Vichy France. The French considered this a treasonable act. Petain was sent to prison, where he died at the age of 94.

de Gaulle was afraid that the same subtle anesthesia of senility might overwhelm him and cause him to perform not necessarily treasonable acts, but foolish acts contrary to the interests of *la gloire de France.*

In order to test himself, he would, from time to time, call a press conference. Calling together perhaps 30 journalists, he would regale these men for three hours with a thousand anecdotes and discourses on history, economics, politics, sociology—a wide variety of subjects—all accomplished without a single note, and without pause or interval. At the end of these lengthy talks, he would say to himself, "Well, I still think I'm all right."

But many doctors, as they reach the sixth and seventh decades, are also afraid of the subtle anesthesia of senility. Further, they have dreams, perhaps unfilled and unrequited; dreams that are half reality and half metaphor. Some would like to carry on their professional activities on a full-time basis to the end of their days. Others, more realistic, understand, as de Gaulle did, that there does come a time when one must make some accommodation to temporal change at least, and that these accommodations require much thought and planning.

Francis Parkman, the great historian of Canada, tells about a Jesuit priest who, in the early days of the colonization of Canada, was trying to convert an Indian chief to Christianity. As he continued to extol the virtues of the Christian heaven, the Indian turned to him and said, "Well, Father, do you have hunting and fishing in your heaven?" To which the priest replied, "Oh, heavens, no, that would be sacrilegious." "Well," said the Indian chief, "Where I go, I have to have hunting and fishing; it just isn't good for a man to be idle."

Not so long ago, on reaching my 75th birthday, an insurance salesman wanted to sell me an annuity. He said, "Doctor, what would you like to do at the time you retire?" I said, "What do you mean by retire?" He explained, "You know, take it easy." "Well," I said, "I'm taking it easy." He said, "Don't you want to go fishing?" I countered that by saying, "I can go fishing any time I please." He tried again, "Don't you want to take time off to write a book?" I said, "I wrote two books last year." Then he asked, "Don't you want to take time off

to travel?" So I told him, "I just came back from a trip around the world." To which he replied, "Doctor, don't you want to give it all up?"

In Stockholm, in 1951, I had the pleasure of meeting Sven Hedin, the great explorer, the man who did the original archaeological and paleontological explorations of the Gobi Desert and discovered the source of the Indus and Brahmaputra rivers.

At the time of our meeting Hedin was 85 years of age. He lived alone in a flat in an apartment house which he owned. That is to say, he lived on one entire floor by himself. He had been a bachelor all his life. In the same apartment house lived his three sisters, one 81, one 83, one 87—all unmarried. They, to him, were the entire feminine world, and he, to them, was the entire masculine world.

His little flat of four rooms, one bedroom and three living rooms, was all lined by books, almost all of them written by himself, and a book by Sven Hedin meant 35 volumes. Strewn on eight or nine tables throughout the living room were papers, maps, photographs, and other materials in great disarray.

I turned to him and I said, "Professor Hedin, what is all this material on these desks?" He replied, "This is work in progress." And I said, "Well, how long will it take?" He said, "About 35 years." He, of course, was an optimist.

Much of what I have to say about these times is autobiographical. For the past 20 years I have devoted myself not only to the cause of rehabilitation but to spreading the cause of peace around the world through the instrumentality of the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration. In 1950 I served as rehabilitation expert for the United Nations; to that end I visited Yugoslavia, which at that time was in a very difficult situation because of the war that had just ended.

In July 1950 the United Nations passed a resolution formally adopting the principle of rehabilitation services for all crippled and disabled persons throughout the world, and offering advice and technical assistance to the member nations of the United Nations.

Yugoslavia was the first nation to apply for help. I was designated to proceed with plans for assistance and so began a new facet of my career as I became rehabilitation expert and traveling physician for the United Nations.

In the winter of 1950 I was ushered into the office of Marshal Josip

Broz Tito of Yugoslavia. Marshal Tito is a short man and I towered over him, but he quickly cut me down to size with his first question. "Dr. Kessler, where is your beard?"

Instinctively I reached for my chin. It was round and clean-shaven as usual. Surely Tito did not expect me to have a 19th century frock coat and a vandyke. Still he had managed, somehow, to make me feel as if I had arrived without trousers. I had to do something to regain stature. So I drew myself up and scowled slightly.

"I do not understand your question, Marshal," I said in my most formal tones.

"Your reputation has preceded you, doctor; I expected to meet a very distinguished old man."

So that was it. I felt a sense of relief, but the disadvantage of arriving beardless still needed to be offset.

"Ah, Marshal, I am older than you think. Allow me to inform you that I not only have a grandson, but that he is a fascist."

Well, Marshal Tito's eyebrows shot up and he flushed. Clearly I had scored, but he quickly recovered and said, with a shrewd look, "How old is your grandson?"

"Ten months."

Marshal Tito threw back his head and laughed. "Doctor," he said, "at 10 months they are all fascists."

In Yugoslavia coffee is the social drink. It is the first thing you serve to a man who visits you, whether the visit be for light conversation or serious confrontation. Tito smoked in silence until the coffee arrived, and continued to observe me in a calculating way; as the small cups of thick, sweet Turkish coffee were placed before us, he asked, "What do you think of my country?"

I had no intention of being drawn into a political discussion, so I replied that I was deeply impressed with the extraordinary devotion to duty I had seen on the part of the physicians I had met in my six-week tour of the five or six republics of Yugoslavia. "They are working against almost superhuman odds, you know, and there are so few of them to handle all your needs," I commented.

"Yes," Tito said. "A shortage of physicians is like a shortage of qualified hospital personnel and a shortage of hospitals and equipment. We are very well supplied with shortages." He shook his head slowly.

"Tell me," he went on presently, "Did you see the work of my

youth brigades? These are boys and girls who build automobile roads and railbeds. They constructed a concrete highway from Zagreb to Belgrade."

I had indeed traveled over a good part of that highway made by high school and university students in the summer months between semesters. The students had worked like horses with almost no equipment, and had achieved a handmade miracle in concrete. However, there was something more important to me than highways and I had a point I wanted to make. "Marshal," I said, "Do you know you have a second youth brigade available in your doctors?"

Again the eyebrows shot up. I explained, "Youth is neither age nor chronology. It is enthusiasm. It is a quality young physicians have after a marvelous dream. Almost none of them had even heard of rehabilitation before I met them. Some of them doubted that it could work. Others felt that their facilities were too inadequate to permit rehabilitation. Yet when I showed them what could be accomplished for people they thought were helpless, or perhaps past help, well, believe me, Marshal, you have a country which is ready for the rehabilitation program you asked the United Nations to provide."

He appeared pleased and was listening intently, so I continued, "Do you know that for the past 10 years your physicians have been deprived of all of the advances that have been made in the scientific world? These have been made and reported solely in the English and American scientific literature. They are not translated into any of your languages or dialects. Don't you agree that your physicians should be given an opportunity to be brought up to date?"

Marshal Tito nodded thoughtfully. He agreed with what I had said. The country should be brought up to date on new developments in the world of science, but the problem of providing six different sets of accurate translations, coupled with the cost of printing, made it impossible at the moment. Yugoslavia was pouring all her resources of men and money into the immense task of clearing away the rubble of the war and rebuilding.

I started to compare the necessity for highways to the necessity for knowledgeable physicians and, God knows, Yugoslavia needed highways, when Tito held up his hand. "You understand we have at the moment no solution."

"But you do," I insisted, "your doctors should all learn English."

"Learn English!" He broke into laughter.

"Why not?"

"Listen to me, Dr. Kessler, 500 years ago we were invaded by the Turks and completely overwhelmed. Our habits, our folkways, our religion, our language, all changed. Then came the Magyars from Hungary. And we had to learn Hungarian. Then in 1812 Napoleon came across the Balkans and we had to learn French. Before the century was out, the Austrians had had us, that was in 1878 when they took over Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of necessity we had to learn German. Now in the winter of 1950 comes Kessler saying, 'Learn English.' What do you think we are running, a Berlitz school of languages?"

Nevertheless, later in the year, when I swung back from Belgrade, I saw signs reading "*Da Li Znate Engleski*" (Do you know English?), prominently displayed in many bookstores which lined Marshal Tito Boulevard.

In the 1920's Walter Pitkin wrote a book called *Life Begins at 40.* Albert Payson Terhune, the famous writer of dog stories, wrote *Now That I am 50.* When Somerset Maugham reached 80, he wrote, *Summing Up.*

In his 90's Bertrand Russell wrote, "I have lived in pursuit of a vision to care for everything that is noble, and is beautiful, and is gentle, to see in my imagination, a society that is to be created, in which envy, greed and hatred are dispelled because there is nothing to nourish them. This I believe, and the world in spite of its horrors, has left me unshaken."